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## The Burden of the Kayayei: Cultural and Socio-economic Difficulties Facing Female Porters in Agbogloboshie

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# The Burden of the Kayayei: Cultural and Socio-economic Difficulties Facing Female Porters in Agbogbloshie

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the experiences of female porters known as Kayayei in Agbogboloshie, Ghana. The Kayayei (singl. kayayoo) is a Ga term that describes these young women who carry goods and wares for a fee. A majority of them have migrated from the northern and rural parts of Ghana to earn a sure income in the southern cities. First, the topic is introduced with a case study based on a personal interview with a kayayoo. Next, the characteristics of the slum, Agbogbloshie, are explored. The cultural and socio-economic difficulties facing these women are discussed. This essay posits that the cultural and socio-economic challenges that a kayayoo faces seem to be largely based on cultural traditions and socio-economic factors that constitute the burden of the kayayei. The paper concludes with some suggestions of how the kayayei can break the bonds of the informal sector.

## **Keywords**

women, females, cultural, kayayei, kayayoo, Ghana, Agbogbloshie, female porter, slum, female socialization, informal economy, socio-economic, poverty

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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# The Burden of the Kayayei: Cultural and Socio-economic Difficulties Facing Female Porters in Agbogbloshie, Ghana

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This paper explores the experiences of female porters known as Kayayei in Agbogboloshie, Ghana. The Kayayei (singl. kayayoo) is a Ga term that describes these young women who carry goods and wares for a fee. A majority of them have migrated from the northern and rural parts of Ghana to earn a sure income in the southern cities. First, the topic is introduced with a case study based on a personal interview with a kayayoo. Next, the characteristics of the slum, Agbogbloshie, are explored. The cultural and socio-economic difficulties facing these women are discussed. This essay posits that the cultural and socio-economic challenges that a kayayoo faces seem to be largely based on cultural traditions and socio-economic factors that constitute the burden of the kayayei. The paper concludes with some suggestions of how the kayayei can break the bonds of the informal sector.

**Keywords:** kayayei, kayayoo, Ghana, Agbogbloshie, female porter, slum, female socialization, informal economy, socio-economic, poverty

## Introduction

Amena<sup>1</sup> comes from Ababu, in northern Ghana. She is around twenty years old, but she does not know her exact age. Her three-year-old daughter lives with Amena's parents in the north. Amena has not seen her daughter in six months, because she has moved to Accra, the capital city, in search of work. When she arrived in Accra, she moved in with her sister. Together with six other females, they live in a small rented kiosk in Agbogbloshie, an informal settlement adjacent to the Central Business District of Accra. Amena moved to southern Ghana for financial reasons, and claims that when she saves enough money, she will go back to her home in the north; she earns an average of 9GHc every day. Unfortunately, all of Amena's savings were kept with a susu collector (an informal banker) who ran away with her money last month. Amena only went to school until she was in fifth grade, when her parents pulled her out to help work on their farm. While she worked on the farm and helped her mother with household chores, Amena's brothers continued with their education. Because of her lack of formal education, Amena's only option is to work as a porter at the nearby market, Old Fadama. She wakes up at 05:00 in the morning every day, and takes her bath at the public bathhouse. Then, she buys food from her neighbor to

prepare breakfast. Amena is charged 0.60GHc to use the bathhouse facilities, and spends 1.10GHc for food. By 07:00, Amena is at the market to begin her day of work. For eleven hours, she carries loads on her head for patrons (shoppers and traders within the market) who pay her very little; she is a *kayayoo*. She weaves in and out of traffic and walks up and down the market nearly fifty times a day. By 18:00, Amena closes for the day and returns home. She has earned a lot today (15.00GHc), which is enough to buy supper for herself and her sister (2.50GHc), to pay the landlord the weekly rent of 10GHc, and to use the public bathhouse for another 0.60GHc. Tomorrow, Amena will wake up again at 05:00 to prepare for another day of work as a kayayoo.

Amena's story is typical of the unskilled and uneducated young women who migrate from the rural north of Ghana to the cities in the south to work in the informal economic sector. The informal sector refers to the part of the economy that is not taxed or monitored by the government; thus, such occupations within the informal sector include temporary or casual jobs, and unofficial earning strategies. The jobs that these young women find do not require previous education or skills, and many of these women end up as kayayei. A *kayayoo* (pl. *kayayei*) is a Ga term that describes these women who carry goods and wares on their head for shoppers and traders in and around commercial centers for a petty fee.<sup>2</sup> This paper

<sup>1</sup> The name of the source has been altered for confidentiality; all of the facts and figures are derived from the interview conducted March 2011 in Agbogbloshie.

<sup>2</sup> The term kayayoo is a combination of Hausa and Ga terms: kaya is Hausa for 'goods,' and yoo is Ga for 'woman' (Yeboah 2009:3).

examines the cultural and socio-economic factors that the female porters face. First, I analyze the living conditions associated with Agbogbloshie, a slum in Accra. I then discuss the cultural and socio-economic difficulties facing these women. This paper posits that the cultural and socio-economic challenges that a kayayoo faces are informed by historical, cultural and socio-economic factors. I suggest some potential recommendations of how these women may break the bonds of the informal sector.

### Agbogbloshie

Agbogbloshie is located in the heart of Accra, to the northwest of the Central Business District (see Map 1). Roughly 146 hectares, Agbogbloshie houses nearly 40,000 residents; it is considered to be one of the largest informal settlements in Accra (Afenah, 2010). Agbogbloshie is made up of informal residences and structures; around 10,000 local residents earn their living from business transactions within the slum itself.

The settlement was formed in the late 1970s by migrants, predominantly produce traders from the rural north, who came to seek work but could not afford to live in the city. Instead they built shacks and shanties from available resources and began a settlement on unused land near the Korle Lagoon. This land was the designated property of the Ga, the indigenous people of the Greater Accra Region. The population of Agbogbloshie expanded in 1983 because of a famine that drove many migrants from the north to the south to escape the hardships (Afenah, 2010). The population of the settlement grew again in the mid-1990s because of interethnic conflict in northern Ghana. The low-cost rent and its close proximity to the city center and large markets were factors that enticed the migrants to settle in Agbogbloshie.

Today, Agbogbloshie is one of the largest slums in Accra and accommodates a high-density population. It consists of primarily self-built wooden kiosks and shacks that lack adequate water and sanitation facilities. Residents pay a weekly (sometimes daily) fee to live in shared, rented kiosks. They must also pay to use the facilities, as water, public toilets, and bathhouses have fees attached to them. Yet, the residents consider the prices of their accommodations to be cheap, because instead of paying a rent of 180GH¢ in advance for two years, for example, they pay a small fee of 10GH¢ per week. However, these fees add up, and many residents do not realize that the accumulated annual costs are often greater within the slum compared to outside of it.

The residents have choked the Korle Lagoon with refuse to the point of ill repair (refer to Figure 1). The area has also become an international e-waste dumpsite; the decrepit electronic appliances from Western nations are



**Map 1** Agbogbloshie is located in the heart of Accra, to the northwest of the Central Business District (Google Maps, 2011).

exported to this vicinity and abandoned in a mass of noxious “first-world relics” (King, 2008). Scrappers pick through the electronics for useful parts and burn those that are of no use to them. This hazardous smoke drifts directly into the Agbogbloshie settlement. The International Development Research Center has labeled Agbogbloshie as, “one of the most polluted places on earth” (Afenah, 2010). The pollution has led to constant flooding from the nearby lagoon and Odaw River, as well as frequent electrical fires due to faulty wiring (refer to Figure 2).

Residents of Agbogbloshie frequently experience malaria, due to the poor environmental conditions such as open sewers and dense living spaces. Gastro-intestinal diseases are also common, due to the unsanitary environment and unhygienic conditions under which their food is prepared (Yeboah 2009:4). Additionally, the ‘free-range’ livestock in the slum is subjected to the same hazardous living conditions and when consumed by the





**Figure 1** Korle Lagoon, at one time, was a pristine resource for the Ga of Greater Accra. It has since become defiled with refuse and e-waste. Notice the smoke from nearby electronic scrap fires drifting over the settlement. Photo taken by Stanley Thompson, March 22, 2011.

residents, causes further health complications. There is only one health clinic located within the slum, but most residents do not have the funds to use its facilities. Because of this, self-medication and traditional medicinal methods are employed when illness strikes (Yeboah 2009:4).

Crime in Agboglobloshie has become a problem since the 1990s. Theft occurs regularly during the night while the residents are sleeping, and occasionally arsonists set houses on fire to pillage the goods in the ensuing chaos. As with many slums, drugs are also a problem in Agboglobloshie; luckily, hard drugs have not yet become rampant among the community. Female residents also face the problem of sexual harassment and abuse, as men regularly take advantage of and sexually abuse young girls while they sleep in their shanties. The number of unwanted pregnancies and harmful abortion techniques is high among women in Agboglobloshie. One source notes that, “each month about 50% of all children born to kayayei at the Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital in Accra are abandoned by their mothers” (Opere 2010). Since 2002, the residents of Agboglobloshie have been faced with the threat of eviction

by the Accra Metropolitan Authorities (A.M.A.) – the city authority has served eviction notices without providing alternate land or housing (Afenah, 2010). The A.M.A. claims that the residents of Agboglobloshie are illegally occupying government land, which is the site of an “ecological restoration project” (KLERP<sup>3</sup>), and that the health risk of the flooding of the lagoon and the toxic quality of the soil of the site is hazardous to the residents’ health (Afenah, 2010). The A.M.A. and the press have exhibited a derogative attitude of the settlement and its residents, calling it “Sodom and Gomorrah,” and marginalizing the social status and self-worth of the inhabitants and the kayayei in particular.

### **The Cultural and Socio-economic Constraints of Kayayei**

As previously stated, a kayayoo is a woman who carries goods and wares on her head for shoppers and traders in and around commercial centers for a petty fee. According to one study, kayayei are typically younger and

<sup>3</sup> The Korle Lagoon Environmental Restoration Project.

their work in southern Ghana is more temporary than their male porter counterparts (Yeboah 2009:1). The kayayei are oftentimes unskilled migrants from northern Ghana who come from underdeveloped, rural areas in search of jobs in the cities to the south. The areas in northern Ghana from which the kayayei hail are commonly places of abject poverty. In the past ten years, the rainfall in the north has become unpredictable due to environmental degradation. Drought, unfertile soil due to excessive farming, and inadequate jobs in the northern rural areas are positively correlated with crop failures and, ultimately, low wages (Opare 2010). The result is that youth from these areas have been known to migrate to the south in search of greener pastures in the cities. In fact, many kayayei were encouraged by their families in northern Ghana to move to the cities due to financial hardships on the home front (Opare 2010). Because of their lack of education and hard skills, women from the north tend to work in the informal sector when they reach the metropolis. To the porters, the kaya business is seen as simple self-employment with quick results that afford them minimum assets for marriage

or for sending funds back home to their family in northern Ghana. According to one study, the majority of kayayei are saving their wages to “enter into large-scale trading or other sedentary work” (Opare 2010). The second most common reason the women enter the kaya business is to purchase material items such as clothing, jewelry and kitchenware, for marriage (Opare 2010).

Some studies have shown that kayayei “live and work in closely-linked groups held together through strong social networks” (Yeboah 2009:4). Through social networking, the kayayei choose which city to go to for work. Most kayayei have family already working in the cities, and arrange to stay with them while they work in the markets.

Kayayei are employed by “travelers, shop owners, general shoppers, or traders,” and “...are used to offset the difficulty of vehicles accessing the center of the markets to load or discharge goods” (Yeboah 2009:1). It is common that kayayei are exploited by their patrons and hassled by police and city authorities (Yeboah 2009:3). One source posits that the kayayei's female clients harass the porters so much that the author has characterized it as “an



**Figure 2** Agbogbloshie. Note the hazardous electrical wiring above the dense housing and narrow streets. Electrical fires are a frequent hazard in this community; due to the overcrowded structures, the fires spread quickly. The unplanned streets make it difficult for emergency services to access the inner parts of the slum. Photo taken by Stanley Thompson, March 22, 2011.



exploitation of women by women” (Opare 2010).

Unlike their male counterparts who use hand trucks or wheelbarrows, kayayei lack such transport implements to support their work. As such, physical ailments due to heavy lifting are common among these female porters. As previously mentioned, residents of Agbogbloshie frequently experience malaria, due to the poor environmental conditions such as open sewers and dense living space. The insanitary environment and unhygienic conditions under which their food is prepared is also problematic. Because of low wages (and quite possibly the ignorance of Western medicinal practices), unreliable self-medication and traditional medicinal methods are employed when illness strikes in the slums (Yeboah 2009:4).

The wages that the kayayei earn typically go “from hand to mouth,” and more often than not are spent on living accommodations within Agbogbloshie (interview, 2011). Many kayayei who care for their children are not able to afford the school fees; consequently, children follow their mothers and begin work as kayayei at alarmingly young ages. The kayayei who live in Agbogbloshie share rented kiosks and contribute to the payment of weekly (sometimes daily) rent; potable water, toilets, and showers also come with a user's fee in the slum. Yet, the residents consider the prices of their accommodations to be cheap, although many residents do not realize that the accumulated annual costs of living are often greater within the slum compared to other low-income communities.

### Cultural and Socio-economic Difficulties

In Ghana, it is a very popular cultural belief that women are seen as homemakers. Thus, the socialization of females is very different from that of males. While boys are socialized to fit into the production system, girls are socialized into a homemaker role. This type of socialization makes girls feel inferior to their male counterparts, and results in low self-esteem into adulthood (Amu et al. 2005). Because school leads to one's role within the production system, the idea of sending girls to school is not taken seriously. It is an unfortunate fact that many parents do not find it necessary to send their daughters to school because of the time and resources that it takes (Yeboah 2009:9). One study of 80 kayayei found that a majority lacked basic education – the first nine years of schooling, from kindergarten through junior high school (Yeboah 2009:7). This lack of formal education demonstrates the low level of school enrollment of girls in the country and in northern Ghana in particular. This gendered socialization, characterized by lack of access to education, inhibits the woman's role in the socio-economic production system,

thus driving her to incorporate herself into the informal sector as a porter.

Another gendered issue that Ghanaian females generally face is inadequate training. The informal sector in Ghana creates a large chunk of its GDP; women working as porters, sellers, or traders drive a majority of it. Because the majority of women are found in the informal sector, they have very little (or no) formal education, and access to information that can help increase their productivity is reduced because of the low level of education and literacy. Thus, lacking the basic entrepreneurial skills in management, marketing, planning, and pricing, kayayei have no chance in becoming a productive member within the economy. Because rural Ghanaian girls are commonly pulled from school before they learn qualitative skills, their knowledge of business



**Figure 3** A local artist's rendition of a kayayee. She carries loads on her head for shoppers and traders in and around commercial centers for a petty fee. If the kayayee is a mother, she will carry her child on her back as she goes about her daily tasks.

and math, as well as literacy levels, are alarmingly low. Without this essential skill, women are often trapped in the informal economic sector, which ultimately affects female productivity within the socio-economic context of Ghana.

Within the high financial sector, women in Ghana are considered financial risks because of their perceived socio-economic status within the society. The result is that it is difficult for women to produce collateral for loans from banks and credit unions. Some women may be able to acquire credit from banks but the interest rates can be as high as 20%, which dissuades most women from pursuing loans from financial institutions (Amu et al. 2005). Thus, many of the kayayei rely upon susu, an informal banking system which oftentimes fails because the susu collectors will disappear with the money, as we have seen to be the case with Amena in the introduction. Without loans or other financial options, women cannot buy land or other assets. Because of this, women are forced to financially rely upon their relatives. If a relative cannot or will not support her, then she must support herself. This also causes pressure on the woman to marry early and for financial reasons. If and when she divorces her husband due to hardships, the woman's economic dependence upon her husband causes her to become destitute (Opere 2010). In northern Ghana these are some of the circumstances that drive many women, with few opportunities, to join the informal economic sector of the city to earn a living.

### **Some Policy Recommendations**

One of the reasons that women are marginalized within Ghanaian society is because of their low levels of productivity within the socio-economic sector. There are many resolutions that can be addressed to ease the challenges that women face, but each one must be enacted at the same time as the others. These solutions include government assistance, self-help and advocacy, education and skills training opportunities, access to assets and credit, and socialization within the home.

There is a need for the Ghanaian government to address multiple issues concerning the kayayei. The drought problem needs to be addressed immediately through the provision of loans, coupled with irrigation and agricultural education. If the rural areas in northern Ghana were more economically successful, less people would migrate south into the cities. Marginalized women from rural Ghana would also benefit from education. Education should provide entrepreneurial knowledge as well as literacy skills that are essential for breaking away from the rural way of life (if the woman chooses to do this). Government funded, women-specific scholarships are applicable in this scenario because they would not only

pay for the female to go to school, but also subsidize her absence from the farm. The residents of Agbogbloshie especially need the stable support, as the government cannot turn its back on human resources. If possible, formal, government jobs must become available to those who are trapped in the informal sector.

Grassroots communities undertaking and controlling their own socio-economic development can best overcome poverty and inequality. Thus, first and foremost, the kayayei must become their own advocates. Perhaps a worker's union could be initiated in each market for fair wages and working hours. Women must also challenge the rationale behind their own invisibility. Non-profit organizations and non-government organizations must be initiated within the community to advocate for those in poverty and to expose the gendered challenges that women face. The residents of the community must also be given opportunities to learn trade skills that will help them become self-sufficient and eventually move them out of the hazardous slum environment.

Women should obtain access to assets and credit in order to become more productive. With assets, they are more likely to get a loan from a bank. To obtain a loan from the bank, they must not be seen as a liability, but rather a lucrative investment opportunity. Banks should enable loan policies that entice women to enter into the business world. For example, micro finance organizations have become very popular in Ghana because of their specific attention to women's needs and interests. Through the acquisition of loans, kayayei would be able to escape from their gendered poverty into a world of business and opportunity.

Socialization within the home should also change in Ghana. If men are socially raised to become the breadwinners, and the women homemakers, then nothing can change. The ideology of gender itself should change; the very ethos of socialization should be adjusted to enhance the role of women in Ghana. Women should gain more self-esteem and respect for themselves, while at the same time men's attitudes regarding gendered roles should also change.

### **Conclusion**

The kayayei of Agbogbloshie face many cultural and socio-economic challenges in their line of work. This essay has discussed the role that these women play in the informal economic sector of the marketplaces within the city. Specifically, attention has been brought to the environmental hazards of the kayayoo's community, her marginalization by the government, the economic challenges that have caused her to migrate south, and the relevant problems related to the kayayoo's line of work. Cultural and socio-economic contributing factors identified



to affect a kayayoo include socialization, education, and access to credit. This paper proposes some recommendations that must be addressed to ease the challenges that the kayayei face in Ghana; however, it must be emphasized that each one must be enacted at the same time as the others. These endorsements include government assistance, self-help and advocacy, education and skills training opportunities, access to assets and credit, and socialization within the home. All of the cultural and socio-economic challenges that a kayayoo faces are informed by historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors that contribute to her life experiences; these are the burdens of the kayayei.

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